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ABSTRACT

This paper is a summary of results of two overlapping longitudinal studies tracing the development of mother-infant and father-infant attachments between 7 and 24 months of age. Interaction between 10 male and 10 female infants and their parents was observed in the subjects' homes. Interaction with parents was compared to interaction with an accessible and friendly investigator. Data concerning onset of attachment and presence of parental preferences were based on the occurrence of six attachment behaviors (proximity, touch, approach, reach, seek to be held, and fuss) and five affiliative behaviors (smile, vocalize, look, laugh and proffer). Frequency of parent vocalization to the child was recorded as an index of parental activity. Two classes of dyadic interaction were considered: play and physical contact. Results indicate that: (1) infants are attached to both parents from the time they are first able to form relationships (around 6-8 months of age); (2) mother-infant and father-infant relationships involve different types of experiences, and mothers and fathers have significant, qualitatively different influences on the infant's psychosocial development; and (3) the father-son relationship appears to be especially important from the beginning of the second year of life. Emphasis is placed on the need for attention to the particular nature of father-infant interaction. (Author/BF)

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# DEVELOPMENT AND FUNCTION OF PARENT-INFANT RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF LIFE

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Paper presented to the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, LA, March 1977, as part of a Symposium entitled "The Family System: Networks of Interactions Among Mother, Father, and Infant".

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## Development and Function of Parent-Infant Relationships in the First Two Years of Life

In this presentation, I want to discuss the results of two partially overlapping, longitudinal studies in which we traced the development of mother-infant and father-infant attachments between 7 and 24 months of age. You will note that though the preceding speakers and I agree that we must conceive of infant development occurring within the context of a complex, multidimensional social system, the studies we have each conducted differ in many important respects. The questions we have posed, the ways we have addressed these, and the ages of the infants we have studied all differ, yet I submit that this diversity constitutes the strength rather than the weakness of our approach.

There are two major differences between the study I am about to describe, and the studies discussed by the previous speakers. Most importantly, I was concerned only with infants who had entered the phase of specific attachments, whereas the previous speakers have considered infants in the pre-attachment phase. In addition, most of my evidence concerns the infants' sociability and their experiences: I will say nothing about the parents' personalities. Further, I am going to focus on three central questions:

At what age, and to what extent, do infants form attachments to their mothers and fathers?,

Do young infants "prefer" either parent?,

and Are the mother-infant and father-infant relationships qualitatively similar, or do they involve different types of experiences for infants?

I have time to provide only the barest description of my methodology. You should refer to the published reports for further details (Lamb, 1976b, 1977a, 1977b). Briefly, 10 male and 10 female infants were observed interacting

with their parents at 7, 8, 12, and 13 months of age. All observations were conducted in the infants' homes with both parents present. Each lasted 1½ to 2 hours. Fourteen of these infants and 6 additional subjects were observed in similar circumstances at 15, 18, 21, and 24 months of age. Detailed narrative accounts of the infants' behavior were dictated by an Observer, and these accounts provided the data for analysis. Interaction with the parents was compared with interaction with an accessible and friendly investigator--the Visitor--who also served to alleviate the parents' anxieties about being observed. Data concerning the onset of attachment and the presence or absence of parental preferences are based on the occurrence of 6 attachment behaviors: proximity, touch, approach, reach, seek to be held, and fuss. We also recorded 5 affiliative behaviors--smile, vocalize, look, laugh, and proffer--while the frequency of parental vocalization to the child was recorded as an index of parental activity. Finally, to address questions concerning the quality of mother-infant and father-infant interaction, we considered two classes of dyadic interaction--play and physical contact. Reliability in both the observations and the coding of the dictated transcripts was consistently satisfactory.

The first slide depicts the patterns of preferences evident during the 7 and 8 month observational visits. You should note that there are clear preferences for both parents over the Visitor on the attachment behavior measures, while these measures show no preference for either parent over the other. The unmistakable implication is that infants are attached to both their parents from the time they first form attachments around 6-8 months of age (Bowlby, 1969).

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SLIDE 1
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The data shown on the next slide indicate that there is a similar

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SLIDE 2
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absence of preference for either parent evident in the home setting at 12 and 13 months of age.

On the other hand, several experiments we have conducted confirm that when they are distressed and are able to choose between the two parents, both 12 and 18 month olds turn to their mothers preferentially (Lamb, 1976a, 1976c). This confirms Bowlby's belief that mothers are the primary attachment figures of young infants. While acknowledging this, however, we must not lose sight of the fact that infants are clearly attached to both parents, and that, in consequence, future researchers must consider father-infant as well as mother-infant interaction. We must lay to rest the fallacious notion that because mothers are most important to young infants they are of necessity exclusively important.

Of course, it could be argued that the father-infant relationship is redundant--that it merely duplicates the mother-infant relationship and for that reason can be ignored by theorists and researchers. In the light of such arguments, investigation of the nature of mother-infant and father-infant interaction attains great importance. We found that at 7 and 8 months of age, there were significant differences between the types of play engaged in by mothers and fathers (Lamb, 1976b). Mothers were more likely to initiate conventional games like pat-a-cake; fathers, on the other hand, were more likely to engage in physically stimulating and unpredictable or idiosyncratic types of play. These differences were not evident at 12 and 13 months of age, however, largely because the types of play had changed so greatly with age that our predetermined classifications were no longer meaningful.

Mothers and fathers consistently picked up and held their babies for very different reasons, though. Mothers were most likely to hold their babies

for caretaking purposes whereas fathers were far more likely to hold babies to play with them or because the babies simply wanted to be held. Taken together, then, the data provide strong support for the notion that mother- and father-infant relationships involve different types of experiences for infants. I interpret this to mean that mothers and fathers are having differentiable influences on their children's development from early in infancy. Again, there is a clear implication that progress toward understanding the processes of personality development is dependent on taking into account the diversity of significant influences when formulating theories and conducting research.

I want to turn now to a consideration of the evidence concerning developments in the second year of life. The third slide depicts the

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SLIDE 3
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patterns of preference evident when the data from the 15, 18, 21, and 24 month visits were combined. The same trends were observed when each visit was considered separately. While the attachment behavior measures continued to differentiate the parents from the Visitor, you will note that there were fairly consistent preferences for the fathers over the mothers. These preferences, furthermore, remained when the relative activity of the parents was taken into account by covariation.

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SLIDE 4
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Though the explanation remains obscure, at least one reason was immediately apparent. Although there were no sex differences in the 7-13 month observations, clear sex differences emerged in the second year. Fathers were far more active in interaction with sons than with daughters,

whereas mothers were less active overall, and did not differentiate between sons and daughters. In consequence, perhaps, boys showed preferences on attachment behavior measures for their fathers, while girls showed slight preferences for their mothers.

These findings were even more dramatic when we considered individual affective preferences. For these analyses, a baby was deemed to have preferred one parent over the other if s/he showed preferences for that parent on at least four of the five attachment behavior measures. [Reaching was not considered since it had proved to be a poor measure.]

Between 7 and 13 months, most infants showed no preference for either parent, and the preferences that did occur were not consistent across time. During the second year, however, an increasing proportion of the boys showed preference for their fathers, until by the end of the year, 90% of them preferred their fathers. Girls were far less consistent--some preferred their fathers, some preferred their mothers, and some preferred neither parent (Lamb, 1977c).

These results indicate, I believe, that fathers make themselves especially salient in the lives of their sons from the beginning of the second year of life. Their salience relative to the mothers may lead boys to interact with their fathers preferentially, while also increasing the likelihood that boys will identify with, or model, their fathers. These processes may be extremely important, given Money's evidence regarding the early age at which gender identity is established (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972), and other evidence suggesting that pressures toward sex role adoption begin earlier and more intensely in boys (cf. Lamb, 1977c; Lamb & Lamb, 1976, for reviews).

In all, then, our results indicate:

1. That infants are attached to both parents from the time they are

first able to form relationships;

2. That the mother-infant and father-infant relationships involve different types of experiences for infants, and hence that mothers and fathers have qualitatively different and important influences on the psychosocial development of their infants and young children;

and 3. That the father-son relationship may be especially important from the beginning of the second year of life.

Like the previous speakers, I believe that these findings have one clear and unambiguous implication: progress in our attempts to understand the processes of personality development is dependent on our willingness to acknowledge the multidimensionality and complexity of the social environment in which children are reared. As far as infants are concerned, this involves appreciating that the elemental socializing unit in our culture is the family, not the mother-infant dyad.

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Table 1

Patterns of preferences in the display of attachment and affiliative behaviors

Early series

| Behavior | M vs F | F vs V | M vs V |
|---|---|---|---|
| Affiliative behaviors | | | |
| Vocalizes | F > M*** | F > V* | - |
| Smiles | F > M* | - | V > M+ |
| Looks | F > M** | - | V > M** |
| Laughs | F > M+ | - | - |
| Attachment behaviors | | | |
| Approaches | - | - | - |
| Proximity[a] | - | - | - |
| Reaches | F > M+ | F > V+ | - |
| Touches | - | F > V** | M > V+ |
| Seeks to be held | - | - | M > V** |
| Fusses to | - | F > V** | M > V*** |

[a] Excluding time when the infants were held

+ $p < .10$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Table 2

Patterns of preferences: 12- and 13-month-olds

No covariate

| Behavior | M vs F | F vs V | M vs V |
|---|---|---|---|
| Affiliative behaviors | | | |
| Smiles | F > M**** | F > V* | V > M* |
| Vocalizes | F > M**** | F > V**** | - |
| Looks | F > M*** | - | V > M+ |
| Laughs | F > M*** | F > V**** | - |
| Proffers | - | F > V* | - |
| Attachment behaviors | | | |
| Approaches | - | - | - |
| Proximity[a] | - | F > V**** | M > V*** |
| Reaches to | - | F > V*** | M > V* |
| Touches | - | F > V**** | M > V**** |
| Seeks to be held | - | F > V**** | M > V**** |
| Fusses to | - | F > V**** | M > V**** |

[a] Excluding time that infant was being held

+ $p < .10$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .005$

**** $p < .001$

Table 3

Patterns of preferences in the display of attachment and affiliative behaviors

15 to 24 month-olds

| Behavior | M vs F | M vs V | F vs V |
|---|---|---|---|
| Affiliative behaviors[a] | F > M*** | V > M*** | F > V** |
| Smile | F > M*** | V > M** | F > V** |
| Vocalize | F > M** | M > V*** | F > V*** |
| Look | F > M*** | V > M** | - |
| Laugh | F > M*** | - | F > V*** |
| Proffer | F > M*** | V > M* | - |
| Attachment behaviors[a] | F > M*** | M > V*** | F > V*** |
| Proximity | - | M > V*** | F > V*** |
| Touch | F > M+ | M > V*** | F > V** |
| Approach | F > M+ | M > V* | F > V*** |
| Seek to be held | F > M** | M > V*** | F > V*** |
| Fuss | - | M > V*** | F > V*** |
| Reach | F > M** | - | F > V*** |
| All Measures[a] | F > M*** | M > V*** | F > V** |

[a] MANOVA comparisons

*** $p < .001$

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

+ $p < .10$

Table 4

Patterns of preferences in the display of attachment and affiliative behaviors

15 to 24 month-olds

| Behavior | M vs F | M vs V | F vs V |
|---|---|---|---|
| Affiliative behaviors[a] | F > M*** | V > M** | ***[b] |
| Smile | F > M*** | V > M*** | - |
| Vocalize | - | - | - |
| Look | F > M** | V > M*** | V > F* |
| Laugh | F > M*** | V > M+ | F > V* |
| Proffer | F > M** | V > M*** | V > F* |
| Attachment behaviors[a] | F > M*** | M > V*** | F > V*** |
| Proximity | - | - | F > V* |
| Touch | - | M > V** | F > V*** |
| Approach | - | - | F > V* |
| Seek to be held | F > M* | M > V** | F > V*** |
| Fuss | - | - | F > V** |
| Reach | F > M** | - | F > V* |
| All Behaviors[a] | F > M** | M > V** | F > V*** |

[a] MANOVA comparison

*** $p < .001$

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

+ $p < .10$

[b] While the centroids were significantly differentiated, the direction of the differences on the measures were inconsistent. Consequently, it would be inappropriate to describe this as a "preference" for either adult.